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# **CHANGE, MEANING & IDENTITY AT THE WORKPLACE<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Professional Biography**

Stefanie Reissner joined Newcastle University Business School as a lecturer in September 2010. Before then, she held posts at the University of Sunderland and Bristol Business School (University of the West of England). Stefanie conducted her doctoral research, a cross-national comparative study of organisational change and learning, at the University of Durham. Her current research focuses on the dynamics of managerial storytelling, for which she has been awarded an ESRC First Grant.

## **Abstract**

*Purpose:* The purpose of this paper is to investigate how organisational change can affect the development of personal identities using a narrative approach.

*Approach:* This paper derives from qualitative and inductive cross-national research into organisational change and learning. Three manufacturing firms, one each from the UK, South Africa and Russia, were studied to investigate sensemaking under conditions of change. Data were collected through narrative interviews and interpreted using an inductive approach borrowing elements from grounded theory and analytic induction.

*Findings:* The data suggest that organisational change affects the personal identities of those involved through the way in which organisational actors' expectations are being met, exceeded or disappointed. The conclusion is that changes in the work environment can result in major revisions to organisational actors' biographical selves and accompanying stories that give meaning to past experiences and future expectations.

*Research implications:* Further qualitative and inductive research is required to further investigate the dynamics of identity construction under conditions of organisational change.

*Originality / value:* Five short biographical stories by selected research participants provide rich insights into the dynamics of identity development under conditions of organisational change.

**Key words:** Work identity, organisational change, narratives, learning

**Classification:** Research paper

## **CHANGE, MEANING & IDENTITY AT THE WORKPLACE**

### **Introduction**

The context of work is a crucial domain for the development of personal identities (Hogg and Terry, 2000). The increasingly complex and dynamic working environment requires organisational actors to reconcile competing demands and expectations, which impact on their sense of self (Galpin and Sims, 1999). The struggles of reconciliation and sensemaking are reflected in the reflexive autobiographical stories in which a person's identities are manifested (Funkenstein, 1993; Archer, 2007).

These stories allow organisational actors to develop their identities, deal with anxieties (Gabriel, 2000) and make sense of incoherence and ambiguity (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking, or the creation of meaning, is a retrospective narrative process (Weick, 2001) that satisfies the fundamental human need for meaning (Bruner, 1986; Sommer and Baumeister, 1998) and affects a person's identities (Weick, 2001). It also allows organisational actors to reconcile violated beliefs (Bruner, 1986) and to establish purpose, control and self-worth (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998).

Little is currently known about the dynamics of identity development at the workplace under conditions of change. This is problematic because personal identities can affect organisational behaviour and success through collective identities (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2000a). The focus of this paper is therefore on how organisational change and associated sensemaking can affect organisational actors'

identities. Short auto-biographical stories from five employees from three organisations will illustrate this. The reflexive (i.e. self-referencing) changes in personal identity have far-reaching implications (Archer, 2007) on organisational actors and on the wider organisation through processes of collective identity development.

This paper is structured as follows: the following section discusses the interrelated key concepts that inform this paper, i.e. identity, narrative and sensemaking. This is followed by the methods section. The main part of this paper discusses five short autobiographical stories which epitomise identity work in each of the organisations studied. The paper concludes that identity development at work is the result of a sensemaking process that is influenced by a person's experiences and expectations of organisational change.

### **On Identity, Narrative & Sensemaking**

Identity has become a central concept to describe the behaviour of organisations and their members (Gioia et al., 2000a), and the development of identity is a social and socially constructed process (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Weick, 1995). In this paper, identity is seen as 'a person's sense of who he or she is in a setting; what threat to this sense of self the setting contains; and what is available to enhance, continue, and render efficacious that sense of who one is all provide a center from which judgments of relevance and sense fan out' (Weick, 2001, p. 461).

Identity is therefore a source of meaning (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998; Svenigsson and Alvesson, 2003) that helps to reduce anxiety (Brown and Starkey, 2000) and reflects a person's values, thoughts and feelings (Funkenstein, 1993). Identity is influenced by a person's genetic material (Gioia et al, 2000b), their perceptions, roles, experiences (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998), relationships (Brown and Starkey, 2000) and social change (Breakwell, 1986; Williamson, 1998). The development of personal identities draws on materials from different domains (Castells, 1997), the availability of which differs among societies and cultures (Williamson, 1998). This explains the influence of collective cultures on personal identity through processes of socialisation (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Beyer and Hannah, 2002) and sensemaking (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998).

Identities are being adapted to changing circumstances while some stability is maintained (Fine, 1996; Gioia et al, 2000a). The development of personal identities is therefore best seen as a narrative (Linde, 1993) and reflexive process (Archer, 2007), in which a person tells and retells their stories of self (Gabriel, 2000; Sommer and Baumeister, 1998) both to themselves through silent dialogue (Archer, 2007) and to others as personal accounts of their experiences (Reissner, 2008). This implies that through telling their story, both to themselves and to others, a person can experiment with different identities (Ibarra, 1999), make sense of experience (Denzin, 1989) and discover new ways of thinking (Reissner, 2008); this is sensemaking.

Sensemaking (Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995) is crucial in meeting a person's need for meaning (Bruner, 1986), particularly in times of change when their identity may be

affected (Becker, 1997). It retrospectively assigns meaning to unforeseen events (Louis 1980) and is widely associated with notions of narrative and storytelling (e.g. Weick, 1995; Brown, 2000). Sommer and Baumeister (1998) distinguish between four different needs for meaning, the fulfilment of which directly affect a person's identities. These are 1) purpose of their current actions in relation to the future, 2) efficacy and control over the outcomes of their actions, 3) value and justification of their self, and 4) self-worth, i.e. establishing a picture that they are worthy individuals. These needs for meaning are reflected in organisational actors' stories about their experiences with change at the workplace (Linde, 1993).

More specifically, Sommer and Baumeister (1998) suggest that a sense of purpose is central to the search for meaning with a focus on any lessons learned. Closely linked to a sense of purpose is the need of efficacy or control, and stories of successful and unsuccessful attempts to cope with change are markedly different. The former are characterised by heroic tales that enable a person to gain a better understanding of themselves, while the latter often feature themes of victimisation and blame that make it difficult for the individual to rewrite their stories. These stories are about the individual's perceptions (Archer, 2007) rather than an absolute truth and may be distorted in an attempt to maintain a sense of self worth. Weick (1995:23) expresses this as follows: 'first, controlled, intentional sensemaking is triggered by a failure to confirm one's self. Second, sensemaking occurs in the service of maintaining a consistent, positive self-conception'.

Particularly in disruptive circumstances like organisational change individuals need to engage in identity work (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998), i.e. the ‘forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Svenigsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). This allows organisational actors to satisfy their needs for meaning (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998) and maintain their concepts of self and adequate levels of self esteem (Brown and Starkey, 2000). There seems to be a link between contextual circumstances, personal experiences and identities (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998). If this is done successfully, organisational actors rewrite their stories and contribute to the success of their organisation through a shared set of meanings (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006). In contrast, if organisational actors struggle to make sense of change, they may use defences such as denial, idealisation or fantasy (Gabriel, 1995; Brown, 1997) that prevent them from developing their identities and subsequent change in behaviour in the light of change. Such stories of organisational actors’ experiences with change and associated identity work inform and are informed by shared meanings across the organisation (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006); therefore personal identity development at the workplace can support or hinder the success of an organisation through employee motivation and performance.

## **Methodology**

This paper derives from empirical research into organisational change and learning, which is a theme that is closely linked to identity (Brown and Starkey, 2000). Its focus is on how organisational actors make sense of change at the workplace. The research



was conducted in three manufacturing firms, one each from the United Kingdom, the Republic of South Africa and the Russian Federation (see Table 1 for details). Each firm perceives themselves to have gone successfully through major organisational change, and organisational actors had to develop their identities in accordance with their experiences of organisational change.

**Table 1: Overview of Case Studies**

<i><b>Firm</b></i>	<i><b>Country</b></i>	<i><b>Industry</b></i>	<i><b>Type of Change</b></i>	<i><b>Research Period</b></i>	<i><b>No. of Employees</b></i>
Engineering Ltd.	UK	Automotive	Structural, technological	January – May 2002	1,100
Steel Corp	South Africa	Steel	Environmental, structural	September – October 2002	7,000
Northern Steel	Russian Federation	Steel	Environmental	May – June 2003	35,000

The research employed a qualitative and social constructionist (Cunliffe, 2008) case study approach, which assumes the construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and contextual negotiation of meaning (Crotty 1998) through stories (Bruner, 1991). The main method of data collection was narrative interviews (Czarniawska 1998), which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Thirty interviewees from each firm, all with different backgrounds, were encouraged to tell of their experiences of change at work. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and fed back to the interviewees prior to coding according to themes emerging from the data.

The qualitative data were analysed using inductive analysis that borrowed elements from grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and analytic induction (Denzin 1989). A key feature of the chosen approach was the constant coding and

comparing of data within and across cases to detect patterns of meaning, and that process was informed by the relevant literature. The data used in this paper represent only a small proportion of the data collected for this research and were selected specifically to discuss the effects of organisational change on personal identities. In the following section, each company is described briefly and the respective stories discussed in context. The participating companies and interviewees were promised anonymity and all names have been changed.

## **Stories of Identity Development**

### ***Vignette 1: Confidence about the Future at Engineering Ltd.***

Engineering Ltd is a medium-sized automotive supplier in North East England. It has changed at a technological level since the 1980s through the introduction of robots and Japanese manufacturing techniques, and the firm's success is reflected in many awards. There is an emphasis on 'doing things right first time' in a self-critical manner and the vast majority of interviewees were positive and confident about the firm's future success. The atmosphere in the plant is often described as the 'Engineering Ltd spirit' and can be summarised as 'we can do it, we've done it before'. This is not an empty phrase, but lived out in everyday routines. Anne's story below epitomises this attitude; she is a retired secretary with 38 years of work experience at the firm.

I was the first secretary in the company to get a computer - mainly because Andrew [my boss] was so keen for me to have one. We started off with manual typewriters, then graduated to electric typewriters, then onto electronic typewriters. The next stage after that was one of those machines, which was a cross between an electronic typewriter and a

computer. But then Andrew decided he wanted me to have a computer. I was absolutely petrified because I had never had anything to do with computers. “You’ll be all right” he used to say, “you’ll be all right”. Well, I was used to putting a piece of paper in a typewriter and being able to see what I’d typed as I went along and then taking out the finished letter. It was a bit of a mess when you made a mistake because you had to rub it out with an ink rubber, or else put tippex over the mistake and type over it and if you were typing three or four copies, using carbons, (before photocopiers came on the scene), then that was even worse. Andrew said “you won’t have any of that any more - you’ll be able to make any changes on the screen before you print the document”, but I just couldn’t understand how this was going to be possible. George, who worked in the Computer Department at the time, gave me a little bit of insight into the whole thing, but Andrew said that I could go on a computer course. I came home each night absolutely shell-shocked because we just went through so much. I thought I would never ever be able to master it, but when I got back to work I eventually got into it and thoroughly enjoyed it afterwards. ... I made no secret of the fact later that I was so glad that Andrew had “made” me do this because if he hadn’t and if I had been left to choose I would never have done it. I am on the Internet at home now and I do e-mails to various people in different parts of the world, which I would never have dared to do if I hadn’t started at Engineering Ltd [to use a computer]. I’ll always be grateful to [Andrew].

This vignette is a life-like story (Bruner 1986): it begins with a steady state (the use of typewriters), continues with a period of crisis (the introduction of computers) and ends in a state of redress (‘I’ll always be grateful to him’). This story is about how the acquisition of new skills is both enabled and accompanied by changes in Anne’s identity. Her experiences with computers increased her self esteem and she subsequently taught herself how to use the internet and email.

Anne’s story reflects the changes in her identity; she can now laugh about being frightened of computers initially and thank her boss for pushing her to master these skills; this is the outcome of her sensemaking. Anne’s story reflect what Sommer and Baumeister (1998, p. 148) call ‘the three hallmarks of successful adjustment’, i.e. need for purpose, self-efficacy and maintaining self-esteem. The story gives details of her work before and after the introduction of computers. Anne draws on the initial

difficulties with the new technology, but soon moves on to what she has learned in the process and how that continues to enrich her life. Initially, Anne portrays herself as being overwhelmed and lacking in confidence, using words like ‘petrified’ and ‘shell-shocked’. The computer course and subsequent practical experience helped her to make sense of computer technology and the implications for her daily work. In line with this sensemaking, Anne’s story changed and towards the end she portrays herself as confident with the new technology.

Anne’s story is not told and lived in isolation but widely shared within Engineering Ltd. It seems that the firm encourages critical dialogue about their members’ experiences with technological change at work (see Brown and Starkey, 2000), thus supporting their identity development of work. Many interviewees reported of a greater understanding of themselves, their roles and relationships as well as the lessons they have learned in similar circumstances. These stories also reflect the need for efficacy and control (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998) and reinforce the firm’s role of a successful player in the automotive supply industry.

### ***Vignettes 2 and 3: ‘Them and Us’ at Steel Corp***

Steel Corp is one of the main steel producers in South Africa, and the opening of the South African economy after the end of Apartheid put the company under pressure. Foreign competitors delivered better products at better prices, and Steel Corp had to follow suit. Mass lay-offs and a series of reengineering programmes attempted to cut costs and transform what was widely regarded as a charity into a profitable business. Additionally, government’s employment equity (EE) scheme impacts on recruitment,

staffing and career development. While under Apartheid management would be almost exclusively white, EE requires firms to mirror the country's demographics at all hierarchical layers, which translates into 80% black, 5% Asian and 15% white employees. Complying with EE involves fast-tracking members of the formerly disadvantaged groups into management positions and demoting or laying off white managers.

Hence, recent experiences of different ethnic groups at Steel Corp differ considerably, and so do changes in their identities. Black and Asian employees have gained new rights and much improved career prospects, which in turn improve their self esteem. EE has been an epiphany (Denzin, 1989) that has enabled them to progress professionally. This process unleashed new waves of potential success stories, on which these employees can build their future. The following vignette by Adam, a black manager in his thirties with 13 years at Steel Corp, epitomises the new identity and outlook of young and ambitious black employees.

I never thought I would survive at Steel Corp, personally. It's coming from the South African background, not the company per se. Well, because of the purely racial background, there's always been a perception that a black and an Afrikaner will never come together. And Steel Corp is a purely Afrikaans-dominated company. So probably [the perception was that] a black guy is inferior and useless and not going to survive. Firstly, I never thought of being at any stage a senior operator because the policies of the past were of such a nature that there was job reservation. At certain colour lines, your [job] prospects would end – that was it. That's why I studied immediately. Firstly I hated the job I was doing because I had my own personal ambitions. I knew that I didn't work at the furnaces till I die, that would be absolutely crazy. And immediately I knew that opportunity to say "fine. With the little finance I get I have to start and look into what I want. And with that I get out into the situation and otherwise I'm not going to be stuck here and then I can start to determine my future." And as the system changes and things are changing: I was almost the first black operator, the first black supervisor and the first black manager. So it was like this first, first, first thing coming over,

which is a signal of a lot of change. When the change came through your ideas also changed. I mean you influence the system and the system influences you in return. And I happened to find Steel Corp home. Here am I sitting thirteen and a half years! If you're asking me I won't leave Steel Corp for any other place. I feel I've settled here, it's very close to my place and I think I've realised my strengths toward the company. ... If you were looking at the whole organisation structure, it used to have a couple of layers before. And when you were looking into the structure you thought "I'll never become a general manager". But I think my perception has changed now to "why not?" I know what's required for becoming a general manager. ... There's often the perception of a cul-de-sac and people think "why do I waste my time here and not go somewhere else?" But now as the de-layering takes place you see that "oh, from my position to the general manager it's only three positions left." So the longer I'm here, the more experience I acquire and the more I deliver results, which will actually count at the end of the day, the chances are there. So when you pace up with the changes you will definitely have an opportunity.

This story has an ascending story-line (Browning, 1991) and conveys a positive change in identity; its moral can be summarised as 'you can do it'. Adam is proud of his achievements and confident of his abilities. He regards himself as being in control of his career, drawing on his decision to study and plan his further career, even though at the time his ethnic background meant hitting a glass ceiling. The key lesson Adam has learned over recent years is that he can indeed progress at Steel Corp, and he claims to have known very early on that he would not do a low job for the rest of his life. This perception is likely to be distorted (see Sommer and Baumeister, 1998), yet this story is real and meaningful to Adam and reflects how his identity and outlook for the future have changed. He is now able to create and enact a new future for himself and Steel Corp.

Stories like this have inspired many colleagues who were in the same situation during Apartheid; 'you can do it' is an important and widely shared message for them. Many of them actively plan their career and undertake self-financed part-time study to

increase their prospects further. The question ‘why not?’ seems to inform their stories of career progression and reflects an increase in self esteem. Their identities have shifted from the perception that they are a second-class person to somebody who has real job prospects and ‘can do it’. Their need for purpose, self efficacy and self-worth is increasingly being met (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998), and their stories are informed by further career progression and success. Such stories will also inform shared meanings at Steel Corp’s and may contribute to a sustainable future for the organisation.

In contrast to Adam, many white employees were made redundant or demoted, lost privileges and faced sharply reduced career prospects in the wake of EE. Many white employees seem to take this personally, as William’s story below highlights. He is a white member of staff in his fifties with 31 years at Steel Corp, and his story conveys a different change in identity. William was demoted from his managerial position, lost many of his privileges and faces an uncertain future. These experiences make William question his personal and professional worth.

All that’s in my office [now] is a computer and a printer and there’s email and a telephone and things like that. So when I’ve presented the training I also take pictures from the people. When I come back to the office, then I start processing the licenses because the photo must be on there, the ID must be there. That is now what’s happening: you must do multi-tasking. There’s no typist any more and I can take that paper and say: produce a license or a certificate. You have all the details, you must do it yourself. You cannot ask the photographic department: go and take a picture. They will give me a camera and they will say: you go, you take a picture, you come, you load it down onto your computer, you copy and paste it, you make it to the size you want and you put it on the license. And that’s why I say, if you can’t keep up with the change, then you’re going to fall off the bus.

When following Fine's (1996, p. 113) assertion that 'the tasks of work are related to the self of the worker', William's story should focus on his newly acquired technological skills. Instead, William emphasises the loss of privileges like the photographer and secretary that used to support him in his daily work. This story is about the breakdown of meaning (Weick, 1993) and has a descending story-line (Browning, 1991). The metaphor 'falling off the bus' William used in the last sentence suggests that he feels under pressure to cope with the situation. The threat to William's need for purpose, self efficacy and self worth (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998) is reflected in his story.

The fall of Apartheid and subsequent organisational changes are a problematic experience (Denzin, 1989) for William and many of his colleagues. William seems to be caught up in feelings of loss, uncertainty and fear that make it difficult to discover new meanings; he seems to be stuck in past frames of meaning (Brown and Starkey, 2000) and clings to his former role (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998). His self esteem has decreased and stories about his future will be constructed against this resigned background, which is characterised by hopelessness and apathy (Ford et al., 2002). William's story also romanticises the past, allowing him to take stock and defend his self from injury (Brown and Humphreys, 2002). Hence, he constructs an explanation of his current situation that is credible and logical to him and provides him with substitute meaning. In that way, he has learned to cope with his current situation, even though this coping mechanism may not be constructive in the long term.



Stories like William's are problematic for Steel Corp in two ways: they are widely shared among white employees and nurture beliefs in irreconcilable differences between ethnic groups through stereotyping (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Such nostalgic stories are somewhat detached from everyday life (Brown and Humphreys, 2002) and may undermine Steel Corp's efforts to develop shared meanings and enact a new future.

#### *Vignettes 4 and 5: New Outlooks into the Future at Northern Steel*

Northern Steel is one of the key players in the Russian steel industry. The disappearance of complex trading relationships, the privatisation of formerly state-owned companies and the opportunities to trade at a world-wide scale after the collapse of the Soviet Union led to major change at Northern Steel. The company began to focus their attention on global markets and embarked on change programmes to make the firm more efficient and competitive.

Most interviewees talked with pride about their new role, their learning and changes in their identity; Sommer and Baumeister's (1998) work suggests that they have managed change successfully. Stories that reflect such successful identity development allows them to maintain self esteem that provides them with stability in testing times (Becker, 1997). The following story by Steve, a manager in his late twenties with 7 years experience at Northern Steel, is about how his perception of his value as a professional changed after completing an MBA in the UK.

[My studies in the UK] helped me in different ways. First of all, I hugely improved my English. And I have some experience – when you're living

in another country, when you're meeting other people from many different countries, you ... broaden your horizon, you may see many things broadly. Also, of course, the study programme was very interesting, because at that moment in time Russian universities did not have anything comparable. Of course, MBA-programmes were offered at many universities [in Russia]. I said that I studied in Moscow [before I went to the UK], it was also an MBA, a two-year course, but there is a huge difference between the courses. In the UK it's simpler on the one hand, but more practical on the other hand. It's more useful for you. In Russia this MBA is too theoretical. It's too theoretical and there's a lot of knowledge, which you can't use practically. But at [the British university] most of the knowledge [we gained] could be applied practically and it's possible [to apply] it right now. The most interesting for me was the method of SWOT analysis. It's really a great instrument for both marketing and strategy. ... The graduation from this university really helped me and I think it increased my value as specialist, as a manager.

Steve's story is a success story (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998) with an ascending story-line (Browning, 1991). He highlights how his experiences of living abroad helped him broaden his horizon, acquire new concepts and ideas and improve his job prospects. It seems, though, that Steve overestimates his role in this scenario, which is not untypical in success stories (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998). The professional development reflected in Steve's story has been enabled by Northern Steel's openness to new ideas and a constant, self-imposed pressure to learn and outperform their competitors. This widely shared mindset may be rooted in the firm's Soviet past where knowledge, learning and education were highly valued. Manager interviewees in particular expressed their desire to learn about other cultures and business practices and to improve Northern Steel's position through new ways of thinking.

Stories like Steve's are told widely among young managers at Northern Steel who have participated in formal development measures (such as MBA study) and who have reframed their experiences and developed their identities accordingly. The subsequent increase in self-esteem is problematic for Northern Steel because these

employees tend to leave the organisation to take advantage of other employment opportunities in the town, as one senior manager explained in the interview. However, these stories are not only (albeit implicitly) influenced by shared meanings within Northern Steel, but they also influence them through processes of socialisation and collective identity development. Northern Steel continues to actively encourage trips abroad to challenge employees' preconceived ideas about their work and to aid the dissemination of new ideas. Instead of adopting such ideas, measures and techniques by the book, Northern Steel's management adapts them to suit their culture and way of doing business – a process they call 'russification'.

However, development opportunities like MBA study are not available to all employees with specialist status. As Eve's story below highlights, female employees over forty are largely excluded from these measures because they are seen as unlikely to contribute to the further development of the organisation. Eve is a member of staff in her forties with 27 years at Northern Steel, a trained engineer with HR expertise, and this is her story.

But I'm of that age now that [I don't get into courses]. Over the age of forty you hardly get into the big training programmes ... like [our training programme for senior managers] ... or the MBA-programme ... for the higher specialists, managers and so on. ... There's more opportunity for development now, which we didn't have in our time. ... Training's important because [our CEO] said once that women over the age of forty couldn't do anything in the organisation. That was a long time ago, maybe ten years. Back then, obviously, I wasn't forty yet and I thought "what's that?" But now at the height of my age I think that basically he was right. Simply living your life and communicating with a small circle of people, you already miss out a lot. There's no development. I think that a reduction [in our ability] might even start because you've got experience and you don't worry about things you've got to learn.

Eve seems to believe that she does not deserve professional development because of her age and a perceived decrease in her abilities. Drawing on the CEO's view of the role of women, her story reflects low levels of self esteem (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998) and is constructed against a resigned background (Ford et al., 2002). Eve seems to mourn the lack of development opportunities, which were not available when she was younger and which are out of reach now because of her age and gender. Her need for purpose, efficacy, self-control and self-worth (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998) are not being met, and she has constructed a story that provides substitute meaning, highlighting her lack of ability to develop professionally.

This is problematic for Northern Steel as their mission to transform the organisation relies on the influx of new ideas and behaviours, which is something that Eve cannot contribute because of her experiences and associated sensemaking. It will be very difficult for Northern Steel to create shared meanings based on very different experiences of change at work and associated identity work. Northern Steel has the almost impossible task to build loyalty among their high-flyers like Steve while including long-serving employees like Eve into the future development of the organisation.

### **Identity & Meaning at the Workplace**

Identity and meaning have been closely linked in previous empirical work (see Sommer and Baumeister, 1998), and this paper contributes to these by investigating

processes of sensemaking and identity development at the workplace. The five vignettes discussed in the previous section highlight that organisational actors' making sense of organisational change affects their personal identities. There are different patterns to personal identity development at the workplace under conditions of change, which are epitomised by Anne's, Adam's and Steve's stories on the one hand and William's and Eve's story on the other.

The former are prime examples of how organisational actors manage organisational change successfully in terms of identity development. Their stories refer to perceived control of their professional development (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998) and increased self esteem and self worth (Brown and Starkey, 2000). They have an ascending storyline (Browning, 1991) and are positive in tone. It can be argued that these are the kind of stories managers wish to see in their organisation because they contribute to the image and identity of what are widely perceived as innovative and sustainable organisations.

The latter, on the contrary, reflect a threat to the storytellers' identities (Breakwell, 1996), struggles to make sense of change and a subsequent breakdown of meaning (Weick, 1993). There is a lack of control over their actions and a reflection of low self esteem and self worth (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998). These stories, which have a descending storyline and resigned tone (Browning, 1991), reflect limited opportunities for professional development and the impact on the storytellers' identities. These are the kind of stories that managers may perceive as counter-productive to the kind of progressive organisation they may wish to create.

Further analysis of these stories suggests that organisational actors' experiences and subsequent expectations for their future have a key role in their making sense of change and associated identity work. In particular, if organisational actors' expectations for the future are met or exceeded (as in Anne's, Adam's and Steve's case), their need for purpose, self efficacy and control will be satisfied, leading to greater self esteem and self worth (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998). If organisational actors' expectations for the future are disappointed (as in William's and Eve's case), their need for purpose, self efficacy and control will not be met, leading to a decline in self esteem and self worth (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998).

The small number of cases on which this paper draws does not allow for detailed investigation of the dynamic relationship between organisational change, sensemaking and identity work. Organisational actors engage in identity work through a myriad of different stories, which limits the current understanding of how organisational change affects identity development at work. Anne's and William's stories about the acquisition of new technological skills are a good example. Anne is upbeat about the new technology and its opportunities, while William does not even consider his newly build skills, mourning the loss of status and privileges instead. More research is required to investigate these dynamics in more depth, and the methodology employed in this research may prove fruitful.

## **Conclusion**

Organisational actors' expectations and experiences of organisational change impact on the development of their identities, particularly the degree of self esteem and self worth (Sommer and Baumeister, 1998). As part of their making sense of change, organisational actors engage in identity work (Svenigsson and Alvesson, 2003), examining how organisational change affects their professional development and future career. The stories accompanying this process reflect inconsistencies between expectations and reality and a struggle by organisational actors to create new meanings and enact new behaviours; some attempts are more successful than others.

The short autobiographical stories, which are at the heart of this paper, suggest that the degree to which organisational actors' expectations of change are met (or even exceeded) or disappointed has a major impact on their identity development through the stories they tell. In the former case, organisational actors are likely to engage in identity work that results in increased confidence, self esteem and self worth. In the latter case, organisational actors are likely to engage in identity work that results in reduced levels of confidence, self esteem and self worth. These, in turn, will influence organisational actors' perceptions and behaviours, which may jeopardise organisational efforts to create shared meanings, collective identities and a sustainable future. Hence, individual identity development at the workplace under conditions of change is not only a personal, but also an organisational issue that ought to be taken seriously by researchers and practitioners alike.

5,850 words

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